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# Projection of values through body ornamentation

Lydia Gerbig

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**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**PROJECTION OF VALUES THROUGH BODY ORNAMENTATION**

**By**

**Lydia V. Gerbig**

**May, 1992**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis began with the premises of investigating the projection of personal values through adornment, the affect it has on the individual bearing the adornment, and the values that a person assigns to the adornment. This was to be in part accomplished through a series of wearable pieces based on architectural and classical references. As I began designing and executing the work, I found that I was intuitively responding to my present personal circumstances, trying to find a balance between need and desire, and trying to bring a calm into my own world. I became aware that my work was first and foremost therapeutic in meeting some of my personal needs, while at the same time I was projecting my values into objects of enjoyment and adornment which address the issues of want and vanity. The needs of the spirit, those things we know are right, and the desires of the flesh, our vanities and egos, contradict each other. My work has become, for me, the place in between where both can exist.

Architecture has been of great interest to me for some time, and in more recent years has become a major influence in my work. I began by looking at Japanese architecture and the work of late 19th-early 20th century Western artists and architects. There is a great deal of similarity in these styles, seen in the concern for materials, integration with the environment, and in some cases, simple purity of form and geometry. In looking at the simple unembellished structures and forms, the basic parts of architecture are recognizable. Whether consciously and obviously noticeable or not, all the basic components of Western architecture are first seen in classical Greek and Roman architecture. Classical architecture and its fineries "constitutes the foundation of all historical epochs" (Norberg-Schulz, 12).

Classical architecture is not merely structural concerns, but is also rich in lavish and elegant references to man and nature; surfaces are plastered with repetitious geometric and organic forms, and the environment within is occupied by the idealized human form. The entire experience of the classical structure is one of grandeur, certainly overwhelming, yet awe inspiring and uplifting. The idealization of beauty and the proportional perfection sought after by the classical artists/builders targets the vain and decadent nature of man. This perfection is unattainable on a personal level, so one can only encounter a representation of it at best and surround themselves with it in an effort to satisfy vain desires. Perfection is a very romantic notion, romance being almost tragic



in its never ending search for something more.

In addition to classical architecture itself, the work of contemporary architect Michael Graves has been for me an exciting and inspiring example of architecture based on the traditional and conventional forms of ancient Roman architecture (plate i, ii). Graves work is not a manifestation of a superficial historicism or revival of the classical language, but a "new means of expression built on the same timeless foundation. . . in which the basic figural forms (of classical architecture) may be interpreted in ever new ways without losing their essential meaning" (Norberg-Schulz, 11,14). As said of his Humana Building in Louisville, Kentucky, it presents a form grounded in past architectural tradition, yet moves "vibrantly forward into the future" (Norberg-Schulz, 10). Graves sees architecture as an extension of man, an "expression of the resonance of man and nature" (Norberg-Schulz, 8). His larger public buildings are organized in the "classical division of base, middle or body, and attic or head" (Norberg-Schulz, 10). With this notion in mind, it seems quite appropriate and relative to restate this relationship in a more intimate manner by placing the architecture on the body.

Antiquities take on an immortality, they survive hundreds or thousands of years beyond their creators and cultures. Looking back to the work of these cultures past is like escaping from reality for a moment and slipping into a romantic daydream. To possess a piece of work with this suggestion of antiquity is to almost possess a piece of history, a precious relic with some unknown story behind it. As I am not trained as an architect or an historian, but as a

metalsmith and jewelry designer, I am not versed in the technical concerns of architectural structures and systems, nor am I literate in the social systems and philosophies of ancient cultures. The aesthetic aim of my designs is to interpret in new ways these recognizable and memorable forms of architecture, to create an artifact suggesting historical significance, and to bring into permanent form a moment of the escape, a tangible and personal notion of the romance. My work is not a revival of some other culture's work, and it is not an investigation of structural principles; as a visually oriented individual, I am responding to my visual world, manipulating and reinterpreting certain visual "found objects" which hold significance to me personally. The basic elements of classical architecture, such as arches, pediments, keystones, and columns, as well as architectural details and embellishments, serve as my found objects around which to design.

Our personal convictions and beliefs in great part determine our personal priorities, and the areas of life we aim to gratify. Many of my personal values, stemming from my faith in Christ Jesus, are demonstrated in some of my design choices and my dedication to the craft. I feel a responsibility to invest in my God-given talents, to develop and utilize them to the best of my abilities and the ultimate glorification of God. This portion of scripture states a great deal: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from

me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (NIV Bible, Phillipians 4:8-9).

After designing a piece under the precepts of my values and convictions, I create the object in hopes of passing on some of those values. Biblical New Testament scripture refers to Christians as "ambassadors of Christ" (NIV Bible, 2 Corinthians 5:20). Likewise, my work is my ambassador—the vehicle and spokesman of what I hope is a positive message. I can not convey specific messages and values through my work, but I can design them in such a way that they exude a certain spirit and suggest a dedication to excellence and beauty. I hope to offer my audience the pleasure and solice I have received by making the work, as well as sharing the joy of the craft, and the beauty of the materials. The process, the product, and the mindset resulting should be of a positive nature.

As I design wearable pieces of "architecture", my audience is of concern, but that focus is secondary to my own personal concerns and values. Though I create a beautiful item to wear, the item does not hold a definite philosophical message to be projected to my audience. The jewelry becomes the product of a process, an ends to a very personal means. The process of conjuring an idea and seeing it culminate through a series of technical executions holds the philosophy—it becomes a therepeutic endeavor for quelling some of my own needs and desires. My audience and I may have the same basic needs, but the means to fulfilling our individual needs is ongoing and varied. The personal needs I seek to meet for myself through the



execution of my work I assume are different from the needs that will be met in my audience. Some of these needs are serious, and some are superficial; they fluctuate between the dichotomy of spirit and flesh. The more spiritually related matters include: discipline and self-control, order, security and stability, and peace. The matters of the flesh include some of the aforementioned, such as: control, security, stability, and comfort, but they find their strength and take root in a different source and by different means—egotism, vanity, and materialism.

In today's world it is difficult to be unique and to stand out in a crowd, so people often compete for their individuality through material goods. One's choice of body adornment, their personal taste or style, is a reflection, and a projection, of a part of their personality and their personal values. People may choose to wear things which have some sort of significance to them, or an identification with a system of values; this can be a display of status, attitude, wealth, or personal sentiment. I believe that as artists we want to evoke feelings and memories in our audience. If there is something to which the audience can identify with in the work, it gives the work another kind of value—a value beyond that which the artist assigns it, beyond monetary and commercial value.

We are prompted to adorn ourselves for many reasons. Often it is for one's own pleasure. Our bodies become a canvas and display form for objects of art—I like that notion of carrying our art around on exhibit. I believe all people enjoy encountering or being surrounded by pleasurable and beautiful things; putting

these things on oneself is a way to make the personal enjoyment more lasting. But perhaps more so, it is for other people. Our adornment invites the attention of others to our person and our body. We all want to be desirable and beautiful in someone else's eyes (as well as in our own). Our clothing and adornment can become superficial and cosmetic, covering some flaw or nakedness we see in ourselves, in an effort to make ourselves more complete or perfect. People have a need for acceptance, and the acceptance we gain from the attention of others renders a sense of security and comfort which we may lack in ourselves. Our egos and vanities are a part of that self-assured security. Securities may be balked at for being safe and comfortable, but they are necessary for our stability as human beings, whether individually or communally. Securities can give a sense of direction and belonging. If our securities are found in established truths, we have a consistent and firm foundation upon which to stand. But if our securities and identity are in temporal materialism and vanity alone we stand on shifting sands, and we will be as inconsistent and unstable as that ground on which we walk.

I believe we can indulge in materialism and satisfy vain desires without detriment. But it is a very conscious struggle of the will to keep our desires in perspective with responsibility and true need; this can be brought into balance with a concern for spiritual matters. This focus is exemplified through an attitude called the "fruit of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (NIV Bible, Galatians 5:22-

23). Our opposing natures, spiritual needs and fleshly desires, can co-exist if we nurture them carefully and properly, for the spirit we feed is the spirit which grows.

As earlier suggested, my work has become for me a way to entertain thoughts of vanity and desire; it's a creative and positive outlet for potentially harmful and consuming concerns. But it is also an exciting challenge and opportunity for me to live and share my faith through my work, to concentrate on and exercise those things which I know are right.

At times when I feel more confident of certain aspects of my life I think more of my vanities; I think of image and appearance, feeling and looking good. As I address these vain concerns in my work organic elements and shapes, and surface embellishments are more prevalent. As a whole, the work becomes more ornamental, more fun or "comfortable" to wear. The work may also be more intriguing and less practical, in order to draw attention and initiate conversation. An example of such impracticality is the large bracelet Foundations (plate 1), which is derived from architectural floor plans. Earrings, likewise, are large and long, such that the wearer and the viewer are quite cognoscente of their presence (see plates 2-3, earrings: Creation and Influence). The necklace Purity (plate 7) is an example of a more decorative piece. The use of pearls, subtle light-reflective texture, and softer colors adds qualities of femininity and elegance. The softer lines of arches, parabola, column capitals, and pod forms function as main or prominent elements in these cases.



One evidence of the need for control, order, and discipline is found in technical challenges and clean craftsmanship. To a perfectionist these are the rungs on a ladder to a kind of self-gratifying improvement and perfection. When I feel these elements are particularly lacking from my life, my work becomes a bit more harsh and self contained as a supplementary measure. The series of brooches (plates 10-14) demonstrates pieces which served as a kind of consistency and order, over which I had control, at various times when my personal circumstances were inconsistent, unreliable, and untrustworthy. The orderly and parallel lines of columns, grids, angular pediments, and keystones are implemented in these circumstances.

An indication of security (consistency and predictability) and comfort in my work is seen in the size and composition of elements. For the most part, my work is symmetrically arranged. In neckpieces an equal number of parts, of similar size but varied shape, are arranged on either side of a central focal point (see plate 6, necklace: Absolutes). The elements are kept small and controlled creating a light weight strand of decoratively framed fragments. An exception to this format is the stone neckpiece Changes (plate 4); the elements are not arranged in an orderly predictable fashion. However, there is an equal number of the various elements such that it could be arranged symmetrically, and the units are arranged in small groupings within the entire composition. This was a difficult piece to arrange; having no "outline" to follow, no indication of which element should come next, I felt a lack of control, and uncertainty in its resolution. The ring



entitled Security (plate 15) is a symbol of security itself. The ring was designed as a traditional token of love and commitment to a relationship/ friendship.

All these structural references to architecture are quite simplified and slightly abstracted. These forms are expressed in a combination of various materials, composed in a series of focal points, and then unified with smaller embellished elements and symmetrical arrangements. In pieces such as brooches, these forms are singularly stated, one formal idea being the primary focus, whereas in neckpieces, a series of multiple forms and ideas are expressed. Surface embellishment is generally subtle; references to doorways and columns are represented by parallel lines and dots, either cut or sandblasted into the material surface ( see plate 8, brooch: Triumphal Arch). Repetitious geometric patterns, derived from Greco-Roman border designs, are likewise cut or sandblasted. These ornamental aspects of architecture are applied in a more literal and straight forward manner, serving as decorative elements. In the case of the collar Love and Loyalty (plate 5) the main elements were cast bronze units resembling tile or pottery shards, each one bearing a different carved repetitious border design. This neckpiece was constructed as a chastity/slave collar, symbolizing the burden of loss and the attempt to regain and preserve personal dignity, represented by the rigid and heavy elements. In being faithful and loyal to someone we love, we can become a "slave to love", conforming and compromising for the sake of the other, assuming a yoke of submission.

My choice of materials acts to reinforce the suggestions of age or antiquity, and structural solidity. Enamels and patinas are associated with the corrosive action of time and the elements. In utilizing enamels, I burn them so that the underlying metal shows through, giving the appearance of a patina built up by time, or the decay of an object's original surface, rather than the traditionally controlled intricate color field of fused glass. The use of stone slabs also adds to these qualities. First of all, the nature of the material alone directly relates to architectural materials and the massive weight and volume of grand structures. Natural inclusions in the stones, edge matrix, and broken edges are utilized in an effort to suggest age, and to depart from a highly machined quality, much like the broken and crumbling ruins of ancient civilizations (see plate 9, brooch: Arch). The stones are allowed to stand on their own merit—they possess such vibrant colors and absolutely perfect spontaneity in the mineral configurations, a spontaneity surpassing this artists' or any others, that the overall design requires less manipulation and embellishment. The use of slab stones in this manner gives new value, in my opinion, to these materials, which are conventionally used in a minimal and redundantly boring manner (i.e. round and oval cabachon bolo ties, etc.).

The techniques employed in producing the work seems secondary, in light of the fact that this thesis was not a technical investigation. Basic metalsmithing techniques of hot and cold fabrication, forging, stamping, centrifugal and open-face mold casting, enameling, and stone cutting were utilized.

## **CONCLUSION**

As this thesis has been the pinnacle of my formal education, and it draws to a close, it almost feels like it is the end of a wonderful career. But it is actually only an introduction to what awaits me, a glimpse of all the possibilities for my work. The use of stones and direct architectural references are relatively new for me, so I have a great deal of research and exploration as of yet to do, so I will continue to be a "student". As my work has become more refined, and my style more defined in these past two years, I am eager to do a more indepth investigation of Classicism and architecture, and see what develops. My influences and choice of materials may vary with my personal interests and business priorities, but I believe the work will always remain as my personal world where I can escape and solve life's problems, and then pass on a little bit of that solice and pleasure I've found.

## WORKS CITED

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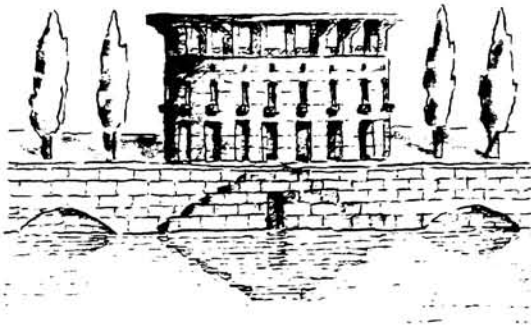


## ILLUSTRATIONS

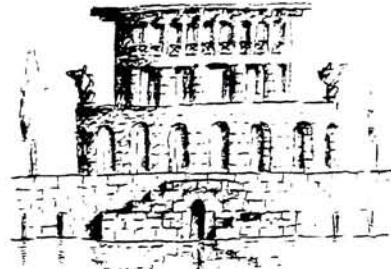
1. Bracelet: Foundations. Copper, sterling silver, plexiglass, biggs jasper. Approximate diameter 5 1/2".
2. Earrings: Influence. Sterling silver, 18k gold, garnets. 1" x 4 1/4"
3. Earrings: Creation. Fine and sterling silver, tree agate. 1" x 3"
4. Necklace: Changes. Slate, soap stone, granite, ebony, bronze, gold leaf, acrylic. 21 1/2".
5. Collar: Love and Loyalty. Sterling silver, bronze, aventurine, wenge. 20".
6. Necklace: Absolutes. Sterling Silver, copper, glass, Brazilian agate, petrified wood. 17 1/2".
7. Necklace: Purity. Sterling silver, enamel on copper, pearls, moss agate, rhodenite, watermelon tourmaline in quartz. 18 3/4".
8. Brooch: Triumphal Arch. Sterling silver, copper, stone (specific name not known). 7/8" x 2 1/4".
9. Brooch: Arch. Sterling silver, chrysoprase. 1 7/8" x 4 3/8".
10. Brooch: Pediment. Sterling silver, 18k gold, jade, marble. 3/4" x 2 3/4".
11. Brooch: Pediment II. Sterling silver, rhodenite, red tiger eye, rhodochrosite. 4 3/4" x 4 7/8".
12. Brooch: Column. Sterling silver, copper, poppy jasper, red-black jasper. 7/8" x 3 1/8".
13. Brooch: Holy Place. Sterling silver, 18k gold, copper, ocean breaker. 3/4" x 3 3/4".
14. Brooch: Faith. Sterling silver, bronze, chrysacola. 1 1/4" x 3 3/4".
15. Ring: Security. Sterling silver, 18k gold, fossilized dinosaur bone.

- i. Michael Graves: architectural renderings
- ii. Michael Graves: architectural renderings

AVENTINE MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT

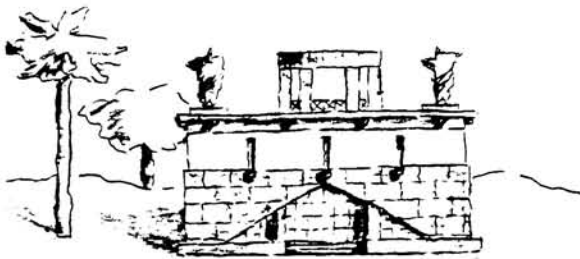


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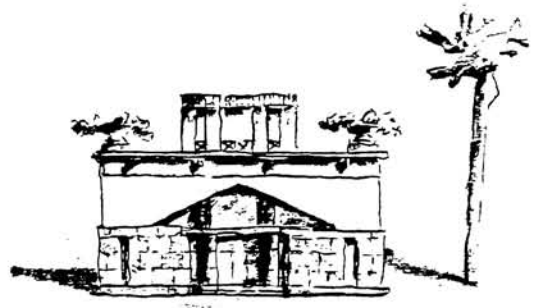


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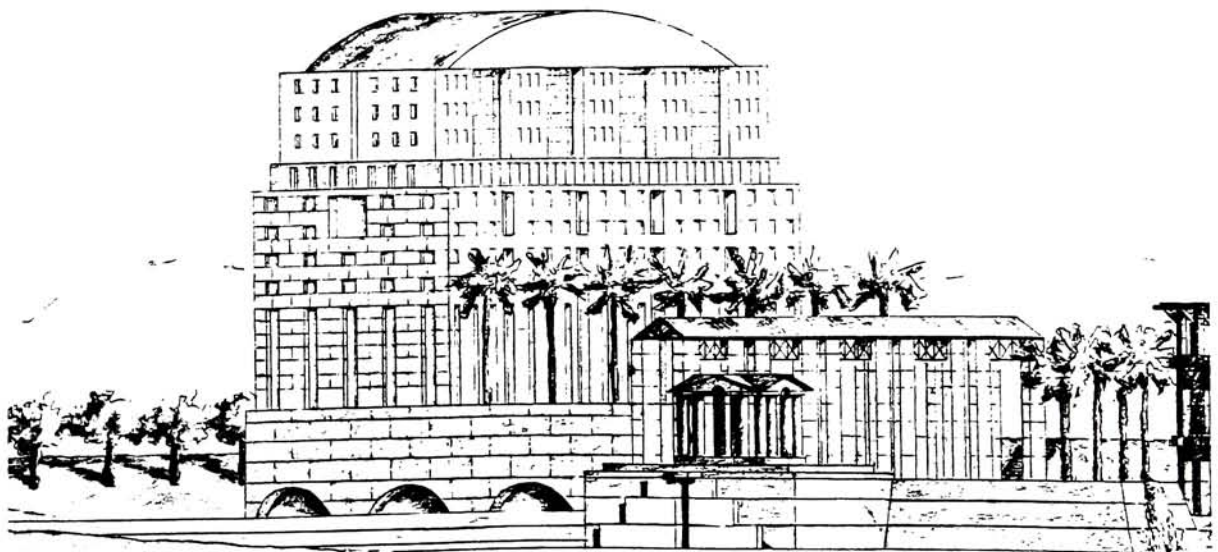


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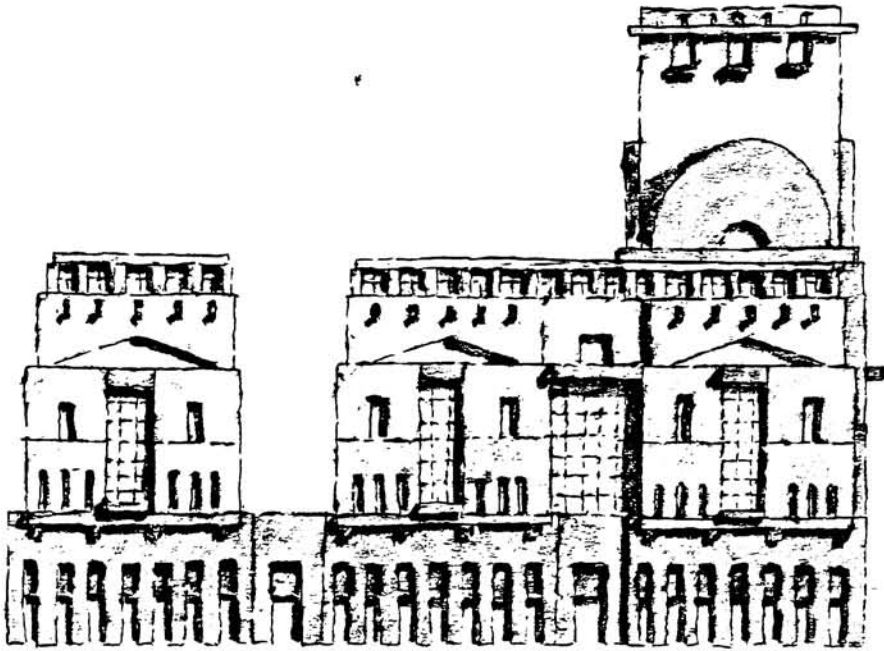
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Restaurant studies

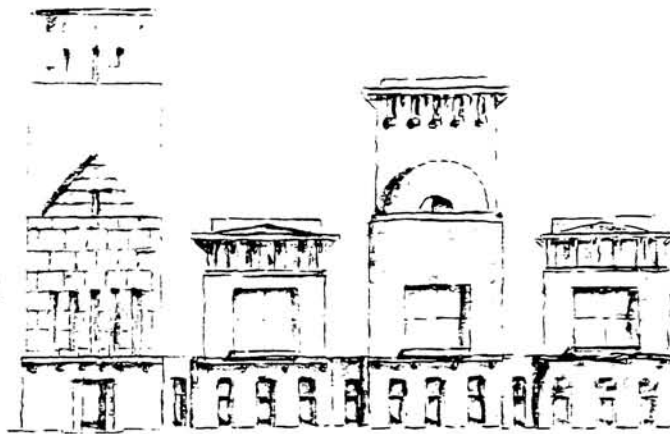


Hotel from the south

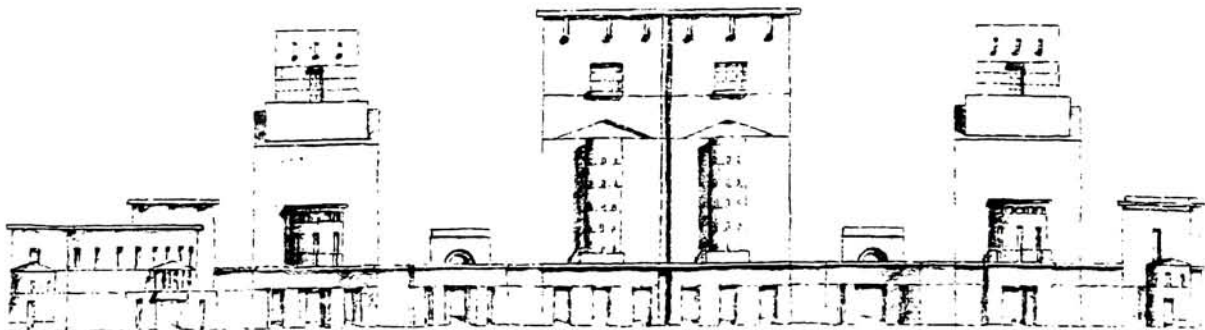
GATEWAY CENTER MASTER PLAN



*west peachtree st.*  
Gateway West Peachtree elevation study



Gateway Eighth Street elevation study



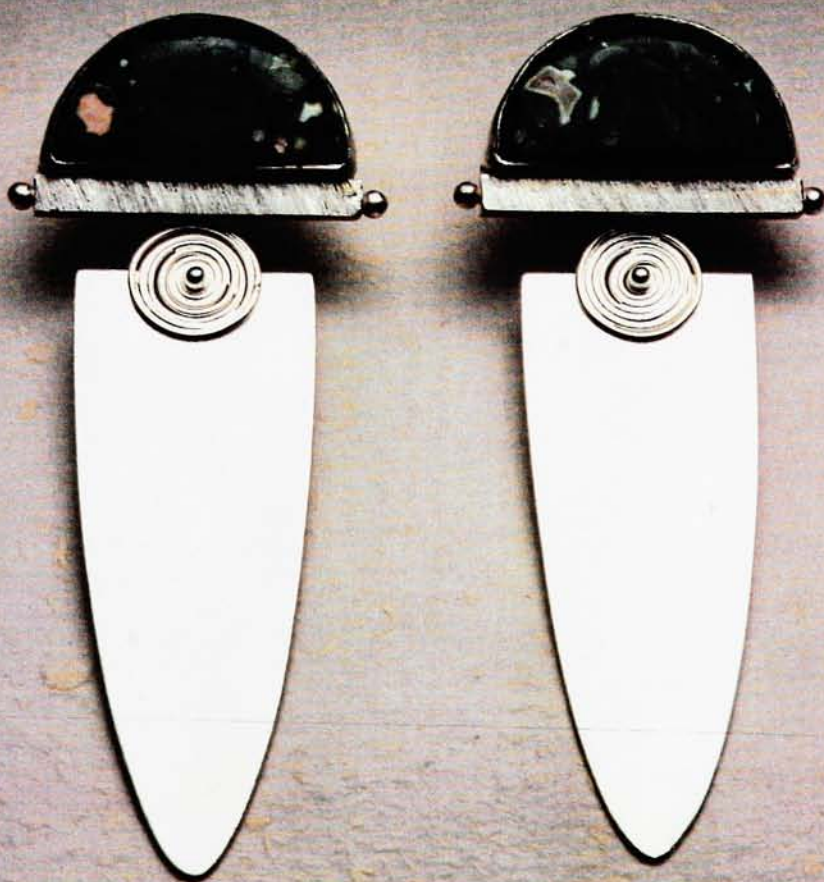
Gateway site elevation study from Tenth Street





















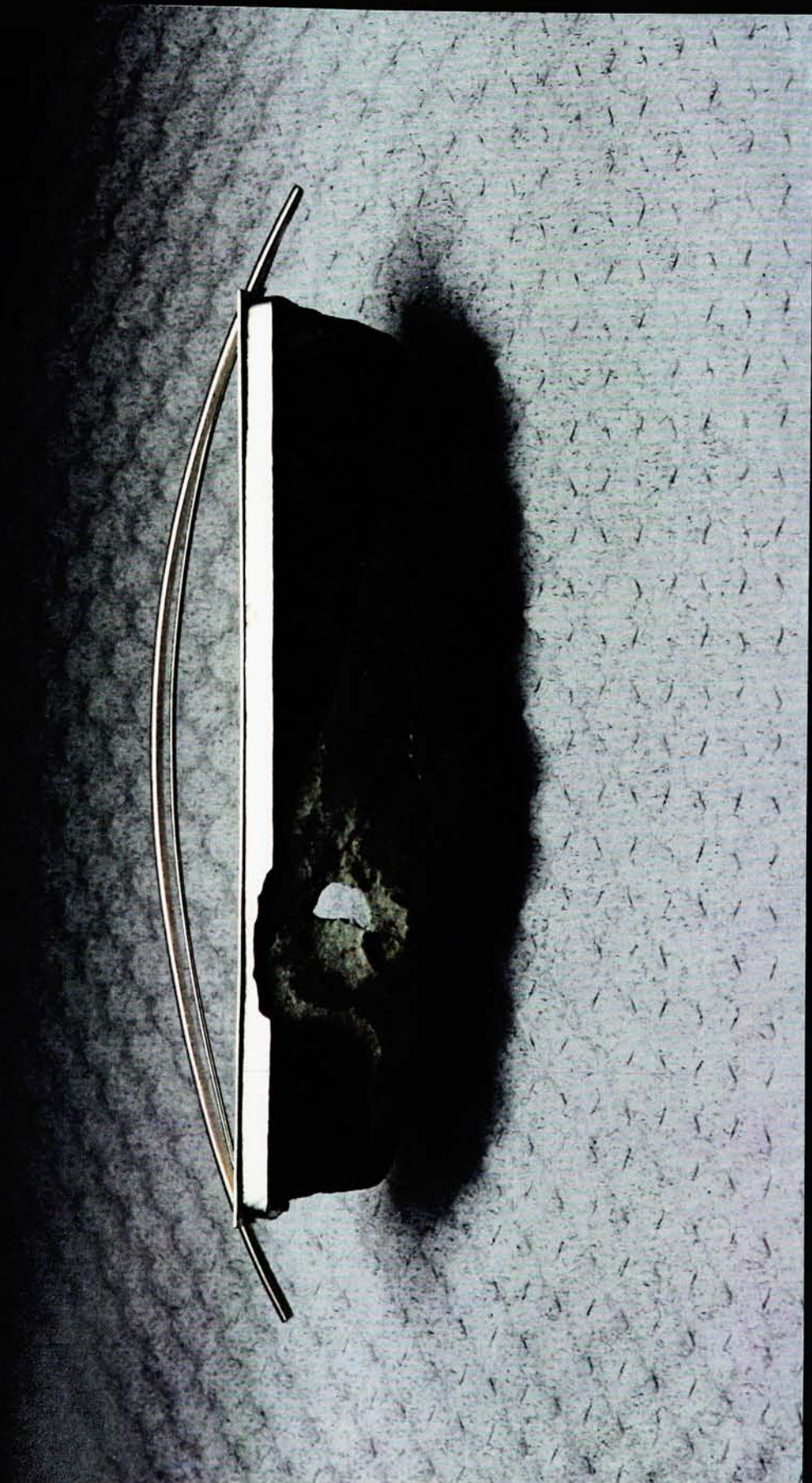






















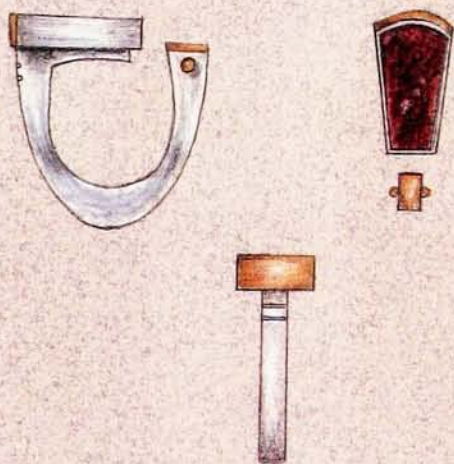












RING: SECURITY 1992  
STERLING SILVER, 18K GOLD  
PETRIFIED DINOSAUR BONE  
LYDIA V. GERBIG